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CIA tried to stop presses on spy story

By Douglas Frantz
Chicago Tribune

WASHINGTON — CIA Director William Casey sought to stop the Washington Post and other publications from printing classified material he believed they had obtained about a sensitive espionage case, federal sources say.

Casey also threatened criminal prosecution of the Post for publication last month of classified intelligence material about Libya's role in the bombing of a West Berlin nightclub, one source said.

Both actions are expected to stir a major debate in press and legal circles over the use of criminal sanctions and prior restraint against the press.

Sources said Casey asked the Justice Department to take action against the Post in a meeting Friday, but the department officials refused to go along with the CIA chief.

There is no indication that any of the publications published material after Casey raised the issue with the Justice Department.

A Justice Department official said Casey and several high-ranking military officers met with D. Lowell Jensen, the deputy attorney general and No. 2 ranking official in the department late last week.

The source said Casey and the others were rebuffed when they asked Jensen to prevent the Post and other publications, including the Washington Times, Newsweek and Time, from publishing classified material about the case of Ronald Pelton, a former communications specialist with the National Security Agency.

The source said that Casey told Jensen the Post was preparing an article about material obtained in connection with the Pelton case. Pelton is awaiting trial on charges of spying for the Soviets.

"Casey came to the Justice Department very upset that the Washington Post, Washington Times, Time and Newsweek were publishing classified material," said the official, who asked that his name not be used.

The Post carried an account of Casey's threat in its Wednesday editions but refused to comment further on the incident. A Justice Department spokesman said the department would have no comment.

Casey's actions were divided into two separate spheres. He wanted to prosecute the Post on criminal charges for publishing excerps from intercepted communications. He also sought civil action to restrain the Post and the other publications before they printed stories about the Pelton case.

According to federal sources, the episode began to unfold late last week when Casey and the military brass went to the Justice Department with their complaints. At some point, Casey also took his complaints to Benjamin Bradlee, editor of the Post, and threatened the criminal prosecution.

In its Wednesday edition, the Post said Casey had warned Bradlee that possible prosecution against the newspaper would be "an alternative that would have to be considered" if the Post were to publish the story it had prepared concerning U.S. intelligence capabilities.

The Post said that Casey told Bradlee that five publications, including the Post, had violated criminal statutes by publishing information about U.S. intelligence-gathering operations,

A Justice Department source said Casey was angered that the Post had published excerpts from communications between Libya and its embassy in Berlin, East Germany, regarding the April 5 bombing at a discotheque in West Berlin.

On April 22, the Post published a story that said the intercepted communications had allowed the U.S. to link Libya to the disco bombing, which killed an American Army sergeant and a Turkish woman and injured 200 people.

The interceptions were key elements in an intelligence puzzle that, when pieced together, created what President Reagan said was "irrefutable" evidence of Libyan involvement in the disco bombing.

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